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Social Work Challenges in the Second Decade of the 21st Century: Against the Bias

By Lena Dominelli, Durham University

Social workers are often working against the bias – taking children into care when parents would rather they did not; trying to support lonely older people assert their value and dignity. These are only ‘against the bias’ when there are protagonists who want to retain power and privilege over people whose positions are vulnerable. Resolving these conundrums forms the bread and butter of much social work practice, and there is nothing unusual about the dilemma between care and control that they portray. Most practitioners decide on one side of the line or the other every day.

However, these are not the care and control, respect and dignity of the person issues that currently challenge contemporary practice and stress-out practitioners. Mass migration, including millions of asylum seekers seeking to escape sites of armed conflict, degraded environments caused by climate change, industrial pollution and the discharge of armaments signify more complex concerns. Their complexity shapes how people respond to each other, but the complicated connections between them are simplified to the detriment of both individual and collective problem-solving. Social workers feel trapped by dis-enabling legislation that tells them they cannot provide services on the basis of need, but constrains their practice through very tight criteria of bureaucratic eligibility often based on immigration status, or rather lack of it. At such points, the bias does indeed seem to be slipping away from the profession’s concern with equality, social justice, environmental justice, and anti-oppressive practice. The stories of social workers having to exercise ingenuity to redress state indifference and state-induced disadvantage are legion. Working with unaccompanied minors seeking asylum reflects one of the sites where social workers go against the bias to procure resources for such children and young people and replace their sense of despair with one of hope.

However, these social work responses become insignificant when placed alongside the rise of the Far Right and its hatred of anyone whom they define as ‘foreign’ or ‘different’. In the UK, the Referendum to Remain/Leave the European Union or Brexit as it became known, unleashed the colours of violent hatred. These are painted in the Brexiteers’ own words of ethnic cleansing and reflected in attacks against Polish-origin schoolchildren, demands that ‘Chinese’ students return to China even though they are of Filipino origin or calls for Spanish-origin workers to ‘go back home’ because they had ‘voted for them to do just that’, and the ‘sooner they did this the better’. These responses challenge community workers who focus on community cohesion and acceptance because tolerance is in short supply and often draped in self-righteous indignation because those white working-class lads (usually) shouting these tolerance-defying terms drape themselves in the clear light of protecting their interests, language and culture which they have just lost because ‘immigrants refuse to speak English, have stolen their jobs, houses, children’s places at school and in the doctor’s surgery’. The lack of material reality behind these claims is invisible, because for them, thinking it is so, makes it so. These white working-class lads lack a structural analysis that shows them that they are the victims of globalisation, and its capacity to exploit people by moving many jobs from one place

where labour-power is cheap and has few rights to another that is cut from cheaper cloth and without labour rights.

Moreover, within the dominant majority individuals and groups who who feel 'hard-done by' have little empathy for the plight endured by black and minority ethnic groups who are disproportionately disadvantaged on any measurable social index – jobs, housing, good schools, university attendance, and health care services geared to their cultural needs. Thus, the opportunity to form alliances that could improve the life-chances of both groups are forfeited on narrow xeno-nationalist grounds. Though there are a few social and community development workers struggling against the grain of such 'normality', most feel paralysed and powerless in the face of Far Right thuggery. In Britain, parliamentarian Jo Cox was murdered by one of these Far Right fanaticists because she supported immigrants, tolerance and equality. At the same time, it remains for the police to hold the thin blue line that separates one group of self-styled zealots from another such as keeping the English Defence League (EDL) apart from another resisting their abhorrent claims, the anti-racist, Anti-Nazi League. The Far Right English Defence League argues that England should be returned to the 'indigenous' English, whoever they are, given a 2000 year history of the invasion of the British Isles by various conquerors from the Romans to the Normans. Their descendants reconstituted the ethnic landscape through intermarriage and settlement and realigned 'the bias' of the existing multi-ethnic fabric of this geographical formation.

Additionally, these issues are outflanked by the new twists and turns of Islamophobia that have become interweaved with the charges of self-styled warriors that have little understanding of the peaceful beads of Islam that thread their way back through centuries of history in which scholarship, science, architecture, art and culture flourished while Medieval Europe languished in misery. In these encounters, fear embroiders exchanges between people and raises walls of indifference and intolerance in and through biased interactions that strangle the buds of hope that sought to break above the ground but a short while ago. Was it only yesterday that people spoke of brothers and sisters who were different from them, but were valued contributors to the rich fabric that bound them together in a single geographic space where they all had claims to acceptance, belonging and understanding from each other? How did the identity of one become woven through the layers of hatred enforced by a loaded gun, while the identity of the other became confused and invisible? Social workers, if they are to rise to the challenges of the 21st century need new insights, knowledges and skills. Perhaps the silken tongue of Khalil Gibran can offer a way forward to the anti-racists of today and tomorrow who want to 'dialogue across differences and controversies' and paint a new mural of harmony together. He penned the words:

'One day you will ask me which is more important? My life or yours? I will say mine, and you will walk away not knowing that you are my life'.

By cutting against my bias and your bias, all that will be left behind will be destruction and nothingness. Practitioners committed to an egalitarian world cannot allow that to happen. We must remain true to our social work values of equality, environmental and social justice that promotes an equitable distribution of the earth's goods and resources to the benefit of each and every person, plant and animal living on this earth.

Reference:

Gibran, K (n.d), *The Prophet, Khalil Gibran*, available on https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6466154.Kahlil_Gibran accessed 12 August 2015.